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The Curragh's secret war

Lt.-Col, James Buchan, the Corkman who served as Command Engineer at the Curragh internment base during the Second World War, talks to Vincent Power of the war of words between German and Allied prisoners during the Emergency years.

WHEN fireworks lit up the night sky over the Curragh internment complex from time to time during the Emergency years, the Irish army officers in charge of the centre didn't become concerned. They knew it was just the Germans at it again.

The airmen from Adolf Hitler's Luftwaffe always celebrated in style when news of a German victory over the British became known. And the festivities were always staged to poke fun at and provoke the Germans' next-door neighbours at the Curragh — the RAF internees.

In addition to shooting fireworks and rockets into the sky, the Luftwaffe marked a German victory by shouting and cheering loudly and by banging dustbin lids against the ground. When the Germans decided to smirk at the British, it became almost a public ritual.

Despite all the provocation, the RAF maintained a stiff upper lip, so to speak, and never made any attempt to retaliate.

This was part of life at the Curragh during the uneasy years between 1940 and 1945 when County Kildare played host to British and German pilots who had crash-landed on Irish territory. A man who shared in that part of Irish history was Lt.-Col. James Buchan, a Cork architect who served as Command Engineer at the Curragh internment base.

His recollections — told in a lengthy interview with the Cork Examiner— represent a fascinating account of this period, the rapport developed between the British and German internees and the people of Co. Kildare; the escape bids by members of the RAF; the isolated incidents of violence between the internees; the relationship between the Irish army and the visitors.





The Cork architect's involvement with the Curragh camp began in early 1940 at the time of the emergency. He answered the army's appeal for recruits and trained at the school of military engineering at the Curragh. He was appointed assistant Command Engineer and later Command Engineer. He held the post until resigning after the emergency. As the senior engineer officer at the camp, Lt.-Col Buchan was directly responsible for all engineering matters — including the maintenance and construction of buildings and structural security arrangements.

When Lt.-Col. Buchan assumed the post of Command Engineer, the Curragh centre was sub-divided into three internment camps: two for the British and Germans, situated beside each other, and a third for the IRA, situated about two miles from the other camps at Hare Park.

While the RAF people made a number of escape attempts, these were generally unsuccessful, apart from one bid in which, two of the British internees fled to the North. The IRA men at the other end of the centre were far more proficient in the business of escaping. Many were expert tunnellers and succeeded in reaching freedom under the noses of the army.

Despite the fact that the British had considerable freedom of movement, some RAF internees felt it was their duty to escape and return to active service. In the first such operation, according to Lt.-Col. Buchan, they simply tossed blankets and mattresses over the barbed wire which surrounded their camp one night and climbed over the top. The bulk of the internees fled from the camp by this means. But later that night the majority were recaptured. Two RAF men got away and returned to Britain via Northern Ireland.



In a second particularly bold attempt, the RAF tried to lift the gate to their camp off the hinges. During daylight, a number of the internees managed to lever the gates from the hinges, using a long pole, and simply walked out. Once again, about 30 were recaptured. There were those among the RAF, of course, who took no part in such escapades because they did not wish to return to service.

There was something of a "reception committee" awaiting Lt.-Col. Buchan when he arrived at the RAF camp to examine the gates and see how security could be strengthened. The internees were assembled in a group, "hooting and jeering" when he came on the scene. "I told the RAF O.C., Flight-Lt. Ward, that it had taken them long enough to discover that they could take the gates from the hinges," said the former army officer.

In another escape attempt, the RAF tried to make their way from the camp by tunnelling.

Lt.-Col. Buchan takes up the story: "The Irish Army camp O.C. telephoned me in my office one day and told me that he thought the RAF were tunnelling. I had a look around their camp and discovered that this was so. All the signs were there. It was quite easy to find out how many people were involved. It was only a question of going through the register to see what individuals were marked out on parole. It was easy to see what names had — up to a certain date — being going out and were no longer doing so. I worked out how many people were tunnelling, accurately.

"I located the hut from where about three or four internees were tunnelling and estimated the distance from there to the wire. I told the Irish O.C. that they would not reach the wire before a month. I told him not to worry, and to leave them continue with the tunnelling, for the moment.

"Some days later, the Irish O.C. contacted me again and told me to do something about it, pointing out that it would be my responsibility if the RAF internees escaped. When I met with the RAF O.C, he was absolutely astounded to discover that we had known all along that tunnelling was taking place. He was amazed that we had allowed them to continue working hard under the ground for a few weeks, even though we knew what was happening. That put an end to the tunnelling."

Relations between the internees at the Curragh rarely erupted into violence. According to Lt.-Col. Buchan, one serious incident occurred at Newbridge between two Polish RAF officers (Flight Sergeants) and the Luftwaffe. A full inquiry was carried out afterwards at Command Headquarters. The trouble broke out at a pub in the town when the two Poles got into an argument with some Germans. A fight broke out and the German officers were beaten up. There was a sequel to the incident. A party of between 10 and 12 Germans ambushed the Poles at the camp and seriously injured them.

"This was rather serious and could not be allowed to continue," reflects the former army officer. "All involved were brought before the Command O.C. and told that action would be taken and their parole stopped if such incidents were repeated. They would have had their parole suspended for a considerable length of time. The fighting between the Poles and the Germans had reached a very serious stage but it fizzled out."

One of the most fascinating characters to find his way to the Curragh camp was a German spy who had been a strongman in Duffy's Circus before the outbreak of war and had toured throughout the country. He was imprisoned at Athlone and was sent to the Curragh for hospital treatment. Before the transfer took place, the hospital ward had to be made escape-proof. Lt.-Col. Buchan was in charge of this job and became friendly with the German while he was hospitalised. In terms of security, special doors and windows were fitted at the ward.



The strongman had a strange story to tell.

"He told me that he had toured Ireland in Duffy's Circus," said Lt.-Col. Buchan. "He was a small, stocky man with enormous shoulders. He certainly looked like a strongman. He had a lot of scars and looked very weather-beaten.

He claimed that he was born in India and on that account, had a British passport. When picked up in Germany at the start of the war, his passport was seized and he was interned. But the German authorities discovered that he knew Ireland very well while in the circus. They decided to drop him here as a spy.

From what we knew about him, he was not born in India but was a German national. The story about him being born in India was one which he circulated at the Curragh. He was moved back to Athlone after a few weeks. He was an intelligent man and very tough and said he had travelled all over the world as a circus strongman. He was an interesting character to talk to."

This German spy is being characterised in a new RTE-BBC television series on the emergency years in Ireland.

The Protestant internees, German and British, attended church services in Newbridge each Sunday. The Irish officers who accompanied them were armed, because of the danger that civilians would attempt to stage demonstrations outside the church against either side. The threat did not materialise and before long, the internees went to church unaccompanied.

Lt.-Col. Buchan smiled as he recalled one Christmas Day on which the RAF and Luftwaffe prayed together at the Protestant church. Needless, to say, they didn't share the same seats.

